

WISCONSIN ENDANGERED RESOURCES REPORT # 115

Distribution, Current Population Status,
Growth and Habitat of Goblin Fern
(*Botrychium mormo*) in Wisconsin

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SUMMARY

The Goblin Fern (*Botrychium mormo* Wagner), a Wisconsin endangered plant, appears sporadically in second growth forests in the northern part of the state. Although previously documented from only a few comparable habitats in Minnesota, northern Wisconsin and Michigan's Upper Peninsula, regional botanists conducting intensive, focused searches have discovered nearly 50 new populations in Wisconsin in the last few years, resulting in a total of 55 element occurrences. We have combined our field observations with information from the three states' Natural Heritage Inventory programs to develop an up-dated distribution map for the entire range of this regional endemic.

Goblin ferns occur in varying aged deciduous, northern mesic hardwoods dominated by sugar maple and basswood. The entire plant is contained in the several-centimeter deep humus layer comprised primarily of sugar maple leaves in various stages of decomposition. A list of associated plants is included, and other *Botrychium* species found in similar Wisconsin habitats are listed.

Preliminary observations from monitoring four populations over three years indicate that the diminutive Goblin Fern appears above the leaf litter in late June and reaches maximum population levels in mid-July through August. Individual plants may appear at any time during late summer or even after leaf fall, and begin senescence in mid-September. In any given population, there may be many individual plants that never emerge above the leaf litter, making it difficult to accurately census populations of this species. Prior to senescence, some plants are buried by autumn leaves.

Preliminary observations suggest Goblin Fern is a short-lived perennial plant. It has been reported that the sporangia do not open, but at least some sporangia dehisce in late summer or early fall. However, spores apparently disperse only very short distances. Preliminary results from field experiments suggest that Goblin Ferns can be transplanted successfully.

Soil moisture appears to be the most significant environmental factor affecting plant growth and population structure. Small plants rapidly dwindle and disappear during dry conditions. Implications for the management and conservation of Goblin Ferns in Wisconsin are briefly discussed.

In addition, a bibliography of more than 150 publications pertaining to the biology of members of the genus *Botrychium* is included as an appendix.

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Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources
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608/266-7012
1997

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Abstract: The Goblin Fern (*Botrychium mormo*), a seldom-encountered and little known plant, appears sporadically in second growth sugar maple-basswood forests in Minnesota, northern Wisconsin, and Michigan's Upper Peninsula. Goblin Fern is currently listed as endangered in Wisconsin. In this report, we review known distribution and current population status of Goblin Fern. Preliminary observations on growth and habitat are reported and implications for conservation and management are discussed.

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Introduction

Goblin Fern (*Botrychium mormo* Wagner), also known as Little Goblin, Goblin Moonwort or Goblin Grape Fern, is a seldom-encountered and little known, tiny native fern (Fig. 1). Goblin Fern was recognized and formally described as a new species by Wagner and Wagner (1981), who had observed it for many years in the field prior to describing it as a new species. It was added to Wisconsin's endangered species list in April 1985, based on the lack of current and historical collections in the state. Before 1994, Goblin Fern was known in Wisconsin only from three historical collection sites in Ashland, Forest and Wood counties (Peck 1980, Wagner and Wagner 1981) and three other northern sites (Trick 1994). It is now thought to be extirpated from all three historical sites. Today, after focused searches in several northern Wisconsin counties and on national forest lands, we know Goblin Fern occurs in at least 55 locations. In this paper, we review its known distribution and current population status in Wisconsin. We also report our preliminary observations on growth and habitat and discuss implications for conservation and management of the species.

Methods

We conducted intensive monitoring of four Goblin Fern populations over a 3-year period. The study followed surveys for Goblin Fern populations completed by consulting botanists working for the Crandon Mining Company. For the purposes of this study, we defined a "site" or "population" as one or more Goblin Fern plants in an area at least 500 feet away from its nearest Goblin Fern neighbor. Plant location information was entered into Wisconsin's Natural Heritage Inventory.

In 1995, we began monitoring four Goblin Fern populations on and near the proposed Crandon Mining Company project site in northeastern Wisconsin, permanently marking the locations of 50 plants in the fall. To mark individual plants, we placed aluminum stakes containing numbered tags 2 centimeters to the north of each visible stem. Monitoring has continued through 1997, and we marked an additional 150 plants in the four populations during this time.

We transplanted several soil "plugs" containing one to four healthy Goblin Ferns in the fall of 1996. Each plug was approximately 0.3 m in diameter, 8-10 cm thick, and consisted of the humus/root layer from the forest floor overlying the mineral soil. The plugs were moved several miles from one Goblin Fern population to an area adjacent to another existing population. Each transplanted plant was permanently marked with a numbered stake to facilitate future monitoring.

Species Identification

Goblin Ferns are recognized by their persistent gametophytes, extremely succulent texture, and peculiar shiny yellow-green color, all of which appear to be genetically fixed (Wagner and Wagner 1981). The trophophore (leaf) is highly variable. In larger, mature plants, the

leaf blade bears two or three pairs of small blunt lobes. The entire blade may be absent in smaller plants. Rarely, on some of the larger, more robust plants, we observed the deeply embedded sporangia extending down the sporophore (fertile segment) onto the trophophore.

Some small leaves of Goblin Fern may resemble those of Least Moonwort (*B. simplex*). That species, however, is found in dry fields, bogs, swamps, roadside ditches, and open, marshy habitats (Wagner and Wagner 1981, 1993) and has not been found growing with Goblin Fern (Wagner and Wagner 1983).

When the Goblin Fern was rediscovered in Wisconsin by the consulting botanists, several specimens were collected and sent to W.H. Wagner at the University of Michigan for identification. Later, we collected live material and sent it to D.R. Farrar at Iowa State University. Both confirmed the plants as Goblin Fern.

Distribution

Goblin Fern is endemic to the western Great Lakes region, ranging across the northern portions of Michigan, Wisconsin and Minnesota. Figure 2 shows the counties of occurrence for Goblin Fern. The plant has been collected from 11 sites in eight counties in Michigan (Penskar and Higman 1996; M. Penskar, pers. comm.). Many of these collections were made in the 1950s; there is no available information on the plant's current status at most of the original Michigan collection sites. In Minnesota, Goblin Fern is known from seven counties containing at least 96 sites, 87 of which occur within the Chippewa National Forest (J. Casson, pers. comm.). Many of these locations have been discovered since 1992, and in the last two years, the number of known populations in Minnesota has nearly doubled following intensive searching.

Habitat

In northern Wisconsin, Goblin Fern has been found exclusively in second growth, deciduous, mesic hardwood forests dominated by sugar maple (*Acer saccharum*) and basswood (*Tilia americana*), typically associated with white ash (*Fraxinus americana*), red maple (*Acer rubrum*), black cherry (*Prunus serotina*) and hop hornbeam (*Ostrya virginiana*). It is not known from coniferous forests, swamps or lowlands, or aspen- or birch-dominated forests, but instead always occurs in the several-inch-deep leaf mold on the floor of sugar maple stands. Many of the sites where we have found Goblin Fern have a gray silty clay or sandy clay layer, underlain by a light gray silt or silty sand. Typically, the sites are situated on drumlins or morainal topography in the Superior Upland Province (Paull and Paull 1977).

We did not estimate the age of Wisconsin forest stands where Goblin Fern occurs, but do note that these stands vary in age structure. This observation is similar to observations of stands made in Minnesota. In that state, Gallagher (1995) found a mean stand age of 80 years old (+/- 23 years; range: 17-140 years old), with only two stands younger than 54 years old.

A number of understory plants typical of northern mesic forests are common associates of Goblin Fern (Table 1). Peck (1980) noted 31 other pteridophytes present at one Goblin Fern site. Other grapeferns we have found in similar habitats as Goblin Fern in Wisconsin include Rattlesnake Fern (*B. virginianum*), Triangle Moonwort (*B. lanceolatum*), Daisy-leaf Moonwort (*B. matricariifolium*), and Dissected Grapefern (*B. dissectum*). Wagner and Wagner (1981) also reported finding Common Moonwort (*B. lunaria*) and Leather Grapefern (*B. multifidum*) with Goblin Fern on rare occasions.

Growth Habit

Goblin Fern grows to a height of from only several centimeters to about 12 centimeters tall, making it very difficult to find on the forest floor. In fact, Goblin Fern has been cited as the smallest known North American moonwort (Lellinger 1985). Some of the smaller Goblin Fern plants, with stems 1-2 mm thick, barely protrude from beneath the leaf litter, while others remain below.

Goblin Fern has been referred to as a "mycorrhizal" species that is extremely dependent on moisture availability (TNC 1995). Plentiful spring and summer rains appear to yield abundant Goblin Fern populations. Reportedly, during dry periods, Goblin Ferns do not emerge above the leaf litter (Wagner and Wagner 1981, Penskar and Higman 1996). Our own observations confirm that during dry periods some plants die back and that new plants do not appear as frequently. Especially at these times, one must scrape away the leaf litter at known population sites to find any of the dwarfed, pale plants. In addition, other effects of the environment on growth habits can be profound. In the subgenus *Botrychium*, dry sites produce stalks that are much elongated and the sterile segments are reduced (Wagner and Wagner 1983).

Wagner and Wagner (1981) found that very small plants less than 1.5 cm tall often dominate a population. In addition, for every plant observed above ground, there may be numerous plants below ground or beneath the leaf litter that have not emerged. For example, when we excavated two large plants growing close together, we found 10 other sporophytes in various degrees of development. Most of these were completely underground. The below-ground juveniles range from sporophytes with their developing rootlets and "shoots" only a few mm long (Fig. 3) to sub-emergent plants above the soil surface but below the leaf litter. It is unknown for how many years juvenile plants can survive underground or the conditions that must occur for the plants to emerge and begin photosynthesis.

Other botanists have noted that the deeply embedded capsules of Goblin Fern fail to open (Wagner and Wagner 1993, TNC 1995). On mature plants, however, we observed that at least some of the capsules dehisce and release a miniature yellow-brown spore cloud when bumped. We confirmed this observation by examining individual sporophores under a dissecting microscope and noting the transverse slit and loose spores.

While spores are not believed to be wind dispersed, as they are in other species within the genus (TNC 1995), our observations support wind as a dispersal agent. However,

reproduction appears highly aggregated, suggesting that spores disperse very short distances. In places where there are one or two plants one year, there may be 4-10 plants the next, assuming growing conditions are adequate.

Phenology

We have observed Goblin Ferns in Wisconsin emerging from the leaf litter primarily in July and August, but individual plants may emerge from late June until after the first fall frost. The earliest plants appear well before the mid-August emergence reported for northern Michigan (Penskar and Higman 1996). The largest number of plants are visible at any given Wisconsin population from mid-July through August. This is slightly later than the maximum numbers observed in late June and mid-July in Minnesota populations (Johnson-Groh 1997). Through natural plant senescence, Goblin Fern populations numbers dwindle markedly beginning in mid-September. In October, when many are covered with the falling autumn leaves, and frosts have occurred, it is mostly the largest Goblin Fern plants that remain. This, along with the delayed or sporadic emergence, and the plants' diminutive size, makes censusing Goblin Fern populations difficult unless repeated visits are made to the same site.

Johnson-Groh (1997) reported that Goblin Fern plants in Minnesota emerged throughout June. She did not define emergence, however, and we are uncertain if the plants were counted if they had only emerged from the humus layer or if they were visible above the leaf layer.

Our preliminary observations on the longevity of Goblin Fern suggest that it is a short-lived, perennial plant. Of the initial 50 plants we permanently marked in the fall of 1995, seven (14%) never reappeared in the following two years, while 16 plants (32%) reappeared only in the first of the two following years. Twenty-five plants (50%) reappeared in both of the following growing seasons. Surprisingly, two plants of the original 50 marked in 1995 did not emerge again in 1996, but reappeared in 1997. This suggests that some plants may skip a year if environmental conditions are less than ideal. However, additional information is needed to confirm this.

Population Status and Monitoring

Goblin Fern is not as rare in Wisconsin as we believed only a few years ago. During field searches in 1994, consulting botanists working for the Crandon Mining Company located 14 populations of Goblin Fern on the proposed project site and adjacent lands in Forest County. In 1995, additional searches discovered nearly 30 additional populations in several new counties. Concurrently, botanists surveying the Nicolet and Chequamegon National Forests located several additional populations of Goblin Fern.

In searching for Goblin Ferns, pre-screening potential habitats resulted in eliminating many potential sites that appeared to be less than ideal habitat. Subsequent focused searches were successful on one out of every three sites examined. This was unexpected given that Wagner and Wagner (1981) estimated that only one in fifty seemingly suitable sites yielded specimens.

In northern Wisconsin, there are tens of thousands of acres of maple-basswood forests similar to those in which we have observed Goblin Ferns, but which have not been surveyed for the plant. Based on our field experience searching for Goblin Fern, we suspect there are a large number of additional sites where Goblin Fern actually occurs in the state and expect the plant to occur much more frequently than existing data indicate.

The smaller Goblin Ferns that have emerged from the leaf litter appear sensitive to drought conditions. This is not surprising since the entire above ground plant is contained in the several-centimeter deep humus layer composed primarily of maple leaves in various stages of decomposition. Smaller plants may senesce after only several weeks if moisture conditions are inadequate. Larger, stouter plants seem less affected by temporary lack of moisture. Wagner and Wagner (1993) described the highly seasonal appearance of Goblin Fern as being more like a fungus carpophore than a moonwort. Sensitivity to moisture conditions probably explains why population numbers fluctuated from the "thousands" of plants seen in one population in the state in the late 1970's to only a few plants at the same site several years later.

In addition to drought, a variety of other factors may affect Goblin Fern populations. For example, other authors have suggested that the succulent nature of the plant may make it attractive to small herbivores (Wagner and Wagner 1993). Our observations confirm this. The tips and leaves of several plants at our study sites had been nibbled off. Microtine rodents and a variety of herbivorous arthropods are abundant at the sites and are likely responsible for the feeding damage we observed. Our observations suggest a similar conclusion to Johnson-Groh's (1995) -- that herbivory does not appear to adversely affect Goblin Fern populations. However, Johnson-Groh and Farrar (1996) suggest that leaf loss from herbivory combined with environmental events such as fire or drought could result in a loss of vigor or population decline of *Botrychium* species found in prairies. Additional field observations could further elucidate the impacts of herbivory, if any, on Goblin Fern.

Conservation and Management

Devising adequate conservation and management strategies for Goblin Fern is difficult, due in part to our lack of knowledge (Penskar and Higman 1996). Observations from our monitoring work, however, have several conservation and management implications which we outline here.

Effects of Logging: Logging and associated physical disruption of the mature forest habitat is believed to be a potential threat to Goblin Fern (TNC 1995). Since Goblin Fern seems to be sensitive to the effects of drought, any activity that opens the forest canopy and exposes the leaf litter and humus layer to desiccation could potentially be detrimental to the species.

During the course of our study, three of the maple forests containing populations of Goblin Fern that we were monitoring were selectively cut. Preliminary observations suggest that this type of logging may have little impact on Goblin Fern persistence, assuming that the plants

are not directly destroyed by the activity. Selective logging that we observed removed only part of the maple overstory canopy. As a result, mostly shaded rich, moist humus in which the Goblin Ferns grow appears to have been unaffected by this activity. More intensive cutting could, however, significantly open the canopy and result in desiccation of the humus layer, or on steeper slopes, result in erosional impacts. The effects of current forest management activities should be assessed, and as Johnson-Groh (1995) suggests, the role of disturbance in the biology of Goblin Fern should be determined.

In the meantime, we suggest leaving a minimum buffer zone of approximately 200-250 feet around each known Goblin Fern population. A buffer zone of this size represents a distance of about 2-3 times the canopy tree height, which should be adequate to prevent significant environmental changes to the forest floor humus and protect the plants.

Transplantation: Wagner and Wagner (1983) found *Botrychium* plants difficult to grow and attributed this to their "delicately attuned mycorrhizal relationships." While this is true if attempting to grow ferns from spores in the laboratory or greenhouse, we have not found this to be the case with our transplants in forest habitats. Transplanted individuals have shown approximately the same success in emerging during the summer of 1997 as did the naturally emerging plants we observed. We attribute this, at least in part, to the relocation of the underlying humus along with the plants.

During the transplantation work we unknowingly and unexpectedly transplanted numerous juvenile plants that had not emerged from the soil humus at the time of transplanting. The following summer, we observed 12 additional plants among those in the transplanted soil plugs. It is also possible that the additional plants developed from spores dropped by the transplanted individuals. We are cautiously optimistic that transplanting Goblin Ferns will be successful over the long-term and hope to monitor individual transplants through several additional seasons.

Monitoring: A number of authors have pointed out the difficulty associated with monitoring Goblin Fern populations. Plants are difficult to locate and they may not emerge during dry periods. Due to the periodic emergence of this species, many populations may have been overlooked during previous inventory attempts.

We agree with Wagner and Wagner's (1983) recommendation to the field worker who discovers a single *Botrychium*: Look around! Almost invariably, more individuals will be found. On occasion, a careful search will reveal hundreds of individuals. Johnson-Groh (1995) correctly noted that it is imperative to search beneath the litter in addition to surveying for emergent plants in order to accurately assess population size.

Future monitoring efforts on public lands should be directed at surveys to identify extant population in areas of planned management activities.

Existing Protection of Populations: In the three states where Goblin Fern occurs, the majority of known populations are within national forests. In Wisconsin, 38 of the 55 existing sites (69%) occur on national forest lands. In Minnesota, about 90% (87 of 96) of the sites lie within national forests. Ownership of this type can provide a significant degree of protection to the species, especially when lands are managed with consideration for the species.

Acknowledgments

Mike Penskar of the Michigan Natural Features Inventory and John Casson of the Chippewa National Forest in Minnesota provided information on distribution in those states. Bob Queen took the photographs in Fig. 1, and Danielle Wood produced the map in Fig. 2. Ann Lacy assisted in identifying references for Appendix A. June Dobberpuhl commented on an early draft of the manuscript. We appreciate their assistance.

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Figure 1. The Goblin Fern: A) Detail of sporophore, shown with quarter for scale;
B) Entire plant, showing rootlets and gemmule

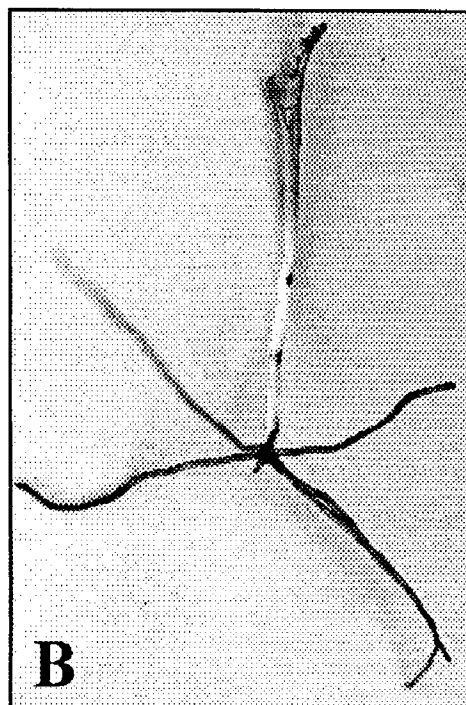
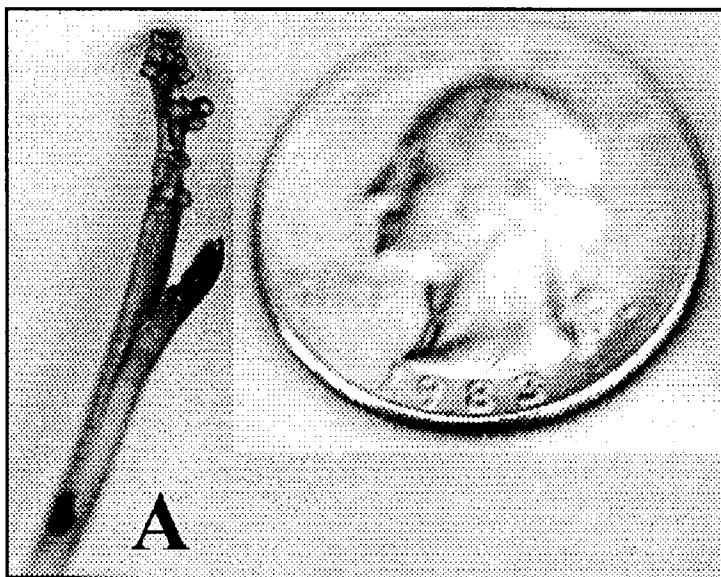


Figure 3. Sporophytes with developing rootlets and "shoots." Scale bar = 1 cm.

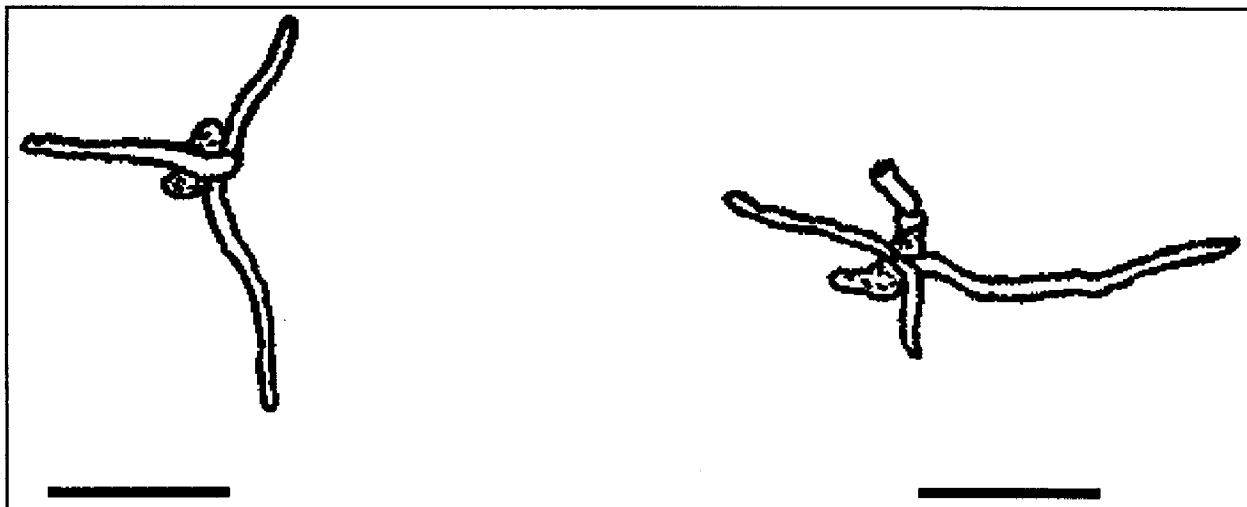


Table 1. Understory plants associated with Goblin Ferns in northern Wisconsin

<i>Actaea rubra</i>	Red Baneberry
<i>Adiantum pedatum</i>	Maidenhair Fern
<i>Aralia racemosa</i>	Spikenard
<i>Aster macrophyllus</i>	Big-leaved Aster
<i>Carex pedunculata</i>	Peduncled Sedge
<i>Carex pensylvanica</i>	Pennsylvania Sedge
<i>Caulophyllum thalictroides</i>	Blue Cohosh
<i>Celastrus scandens</i>	American Bittersweet
<i>Claytonia caroliniana</i>	Spring Beauty
<i>Clinopodium vulgare</i>	Wild Basil
<i>Dicentra cucullaria</i>	Dutchman's Breeches
<i>Dirca palustris</i>	Leatherwood
<i>Dryopteris intermedia</i>	Florist's Fern
<i>Maianthemum canadense</i>	Canada Mayflower
<i>Monotropa uniflora</i>	Indian Pipe
<i>Osmorhiza claytoni</i>	Hairy Sweet Cicely
<i>Polygonatum pubescens</i>	Downy Solomon's Seal
<i>Sambucus pubens</i>	Red Elder
<i>Sanguinaria canadensis</i>	Bloodroot
<i>Trientalis borealis</i>	Starflower
<i>Trillium grandiflorum</i>	Trillium
<i>Uvularia grandiflora</i>	Bellwort

Appendix A: *Botrychium* Bibliography

Works pertaining to the biology of *Botrychium* species and published since 1980 are listed below. A few older publications are included, and a number of references pertaining to the Ophioglossaceae -- but not specific to *Botrychium* -- are also included. The bibliography is intended to be comprehensive, but not exhaustive. A number of Ph.D. theses are included, but government agency and other unpublished reports have been omitted. References are listed alphabetically by author in standard journal format. Works are in English unless otherwise noted. *Note:* Citations have not been verified, and readers are encouraged to check the original work for accuracy before citing.

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